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Visibility and invisibility in, of, and through textbook publication

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Abstract

In their production and their role in academic life, textbooks lie at the intersection of a number of 'regimes of visibility' (and invisibility). In this contribution I reflect on my own experience of textbook authorship to highlight some of these regimes: firstly, the processes through which textbooks are published; secondly, the mechanisms of monitoring and measuring of academic production; thirdly, disciplinary hierarchies of reputation and influence; and fourthly, considering the textbook as a technology of visibility itself. Through all of these, what is left *invisible* is the knowing, learning author. I highlight some of the implications of this invisibility for geography.

Key words: textbooks; visibility; performativity; geography

In this article I wish to highlight the visibilities and invisibilities that shape and work through textbook production, considering some of their implications. To this end, I reflect on my first experience of textbook authorship (Couper 2015), and draw on the work of Brighenti (2007; 2010). He theorises visibility as a social process that combines the domains of aesthetics and politics. This emphasises visibility as relational: the domain of aesthetics pertaining to relations of perception, and the domain of politics, to relations of power. Brighenti (2010) argues against a separation of the literal meaning of visibility (as a function of the senses) from the metaphorical meaning (visibility associated with symbolic meaning), suggesting instead that these are different, yet interwoven, aspects of social visibility. That which is perceived is acknowledged: "visibility breeds identification" (Brighenti 2010, 333). Visibility may pertain to sites, subjects, and effects.

While there is a certain symmetry to visibility, in that we both see and are seen, Brighenti highlights that the social processes of visibility, the relationships of visibility, are often asymmetric. In any context the particular relations of visibility, the particular asymmetries, present are dependent upon – and often planned and organised through – a multitude of social, technical and political arrangements. Brighenti (2010, 4) refers to these as “regimes of visibility”. In what follows, I configure textbook production as lying at the intersection of a number of such regimes, while recognising that the regimes themselves are interconnected.

First, the arrangements through which textbook production happens constitute a complex regime of multiple visibilities and invisibilities. Of particular interest here are the subjects (actors) within this regime: the authors, peer reviewers and editors. The latter, in particular, have little visibility within the discipline, yet significant agency. Anonymous peer review of a book proposal renders the reviewers, as individuals, invisible in this process (although they may be prominent academics in their field). But what of the author? Having spent my career in ‘teaching-led’ universities which afford little time for research, the lack of a lengthy publications list meant that I was relatively invisible as an academic, such that one reviewer queried whether I was a sufficient authority on the topic to author the book I had proposed. Here the regime of visibility associated with disciplinary hierarchies (which I return to later) appeared to be at play. Ultimately, editors have the agency to subvert such power structures, rendering the invisible would-be author (more) visible through accepting a proposal and publishing the resulting textbook. At the same time, editors are significant gatekeepers within the discipline (Johnston 2006), shaping the disciplinary content and understandings that students encounter. Bringing these together, the publishing company is itself a *site* of visibility (of the textbook and its author), a *subject* of visibility (through the profile of its catalogue), and an actant, with particular publishing and marketing strategies which shape this regime of visibility.

Second, textbook authorship, as a form of academic 'production', takes place within a regime of visibility associated with the measuring and monitoring of such production. Systems of performance-based research management, such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), or New Zealand's Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) and associated Quality Evaluation (QE), value some forms of academic work and not others, thus rendering some more visible, at least in the domain of politics, than others (see Sidaway 2000 for a useful commentary on commodification, power, positionality, and academic production). In the case of the REF, official guidance is somewhat ambiguous when it comes to textbooks: they may be eligible if they "embody research as defined in" REF guidance (HEFCE 2012, 22). Nevertheless, textbooks have little kudos for REF submissions. They thus lack visibility, lack recognition, within this performative system. This influences scholars' decisions about how to direct their publication efforts (Smart 2009; Roberts 2012; and see the contributions of Inkpen 2017; Ramdas *et al* 2017 and Warf 2017 in this issue), Clark & Phillips (2008) reporting that publishers struggle to commission textbooks at particular times in relation to the research assessment 'cycle'. In the UK, there is some attempt to balance the disjuncture between research and teaching through a new national mechanism of performance monitoring, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). However, all indications are that textbook authorship will remain largely invisible here too¹. Textbooks, as an act of scholarship, are visible neither as 'research' nor as 'teaching'.

Third, the hierarchies of the discipline constitute a regime of visibility, determining who is visible, in what contexts and networks. Here Brighenti's (2010) argument that the literal and metaphorical (symbolic) dimensions of visibility are interwoven is clearly illustrated: increased 'literal' visibility through written publications (and subsequent citations) is associated with increased metaphorical visibility in the form of reputation and influence. Reputations are built on written (visible) contributions to the discipline. Evidence indicates that the citation rate of new publications is in turn influenced by author reputation (Peterson

et al 2014; though note that their work focused on the natural sciences rather than geography), thus literal visibility and metaphorical visibility reinforce each other. Fourth, is the textbook itself, as a technology of reproduction of the discipline. Johnston (2006) highlights that textbooks are often used as a tool to promote disciplinary change. I confess to this myself: arguing in the final chapter of *A Student's Introduction to Geographical Thought* for a move away from a binary understanding of human/physical geography and associated calls for 'reintegration', towards a more nuanced appreciation of the multiple forms of similarity and difference that can be found across the breadth of the discipline. This would facilitate a (re)acknowledgement of geography and geographers who may currently find themselves lost in the gap 'between' the human and the physical, yet without imposing 'integration' on all. Textbooks thus provide a means of rendering new agendas visible, along the lines that Sidaway and Hall (2017) have revisited in the introduction to this set of papers. Johnston (2006, 290) also discusses the "politics of silence" whereby areas of the discipline are omitted from textbooks, rendering them invisible. In writing *A Student's Introduction...*, in which specific examples of research (journal articles) are discussed in some detail, I was conscious that this entailed promoting the work of some individuals and not others; increasing their visibility, at least to student readers. Textbooks thus contribute to the visibility or invisibility of both geographies and geographers.

Textbook production and use thus operates through, shapes and is shaped by, at least four intersecting regimes of visibility: the processes of proposal, authorship and publication; the performative regimes by which academic 'production' is monitored and measured; disciplinary hierarchies; and as technologies of visibility themselves. As a textbook author, I argue that throughout the operation of these regimes of visibility something is lost. What is usually unacknowledged, unrecognised and thus unvalued (symbolic invisibility), is the *knowing* author; the living, breathing, *learning* author. In the performative knowledge economy, the object or product of the textbook (or journal article, or monograph) 'stands for' knowledge as its substitute. As Roberts (2012, 17) put it, "it is *performance*, not knowledge,

that counts". Knowledge has indeed become externalised from the knower (Lyotard, 1984), yet in the externalised form of the textbook, monograph or journal article it stands for, or represents, the quality or value of the individual author (Ball 2010). The effects that the process of writing a textbook may have on its author – the 'coming to know' that accompanies and is part of that process – is invisible. There are likely to be implications for all disciplines, but I think there are particular implications for geography, given the wide-ranging nature of the discipline. The current regimes of visibility constituted by mechanisms of audit push towards specialisation: the journal article, the monograph. Textbooks are necessarily broader, more generalist. Integrative and synthetic forms of knowledge have particular prominence in geography (although I do not claim that geography is *only* or *all* integrative and synthetic). For me personally, writing a textbook of some *breadth* undoubtedly left with me a greater *depth* of understanding of the discipline. As a result, I have become a better geographer, better teacher of geography, and better leader of geography provision than I may otherwise have been. Authoring this particular textbook has also had some tangible (visible) impact on the discipline through the role I occupy: having argued that the binary construction of geography is over-simplistic, philosophically questionable and not particularly helpful, it makes sense that the geography provision I lead now includes an Environmental Geography degree programme that spans a spectrum of forms of geographical knowledge, running alongside our Geography and Human Geography degrees.

In sum, I suggest there is a case for the literal visibility of the textbook (as object) and its author (as a name on the cover) to be recombined with a (re)valuing of the process of textbook production within academic career trajectories, and within the life of the discipline. This article offers a very small start by highlighting some benefits of textbook writing, rendering the value of the process for authors just a little more visible. Shifting cultures of performativity so as to better recognise textbook authorship is a much bigger, collective

challenge for the disciplinary community. While we are at it, increased visibility for editors, and their roles in shaping the discipline, would not go amiss either.

Notes

1. The UK Government's 'technical consultation' on the TEF (DBIS, 2016) lists "involvement of staff who teach in research, scholarship or professional practice" as an aspect of the quality of the 'learning environment'. This is the closest it gets to acknowledging textbook production.

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